

Explaining welfare chauvinism in Belgium: Self-interest, ideology, or resentment?

Tina Goldschmidt (*presenting/corresponding author*)

Department of Sociology, Umeå University

Institute of Political Science, University of Duisburg-Essen

tina.goldschmidt@umu.se

Koen Abts

Department of Sociology, Tilburg University

k.abts@uvt.nl

Bart Meuleman

Center for Sociological Research, KU Leuven

bart.meuleman@kuleuven.be

Extended Abstract

Across Europe, populist and radical right-wing parties are basing much of their electoral successes on the promise to protect the material interests of national majorities against external threats, for example, from immigrants seeking welfare services (cf. de Koster et al., 2013). They cater to their voters' *welfare chauvinism*—their desire to exclude immigrants from being the target of government spending, which is justified by an imagined zero-sum tradeoff between spending on natives and spending on immigrants. Understanding what motivates individuals to embrace welfare chauvinistic appeals is thus important to understanding the growing electoral success of the populist and radical right across Europe.

The extant literature proposes three main micro-level pathways into welfare chauvinism. According to *losers of globalization* thesis, those who are “left behind” by globalization, modernization, and related economic transformations are also those who are most likely to harbor welfare chauvinistic attitudes (Esping-Andersen 1999). Being left behind can of course be indicated by measures of objective economic hardship or risk (e.g., unemployment, poverty, low educational attainment) and resulting material self-interest in government-provided welfare, which have been shown to be good predictors of welfare chauvinism among European majorities (Degen, Kuhn, and van der Brug 2018). But feeling left behind may also result from feelings of *resentment*, i.e., a sense of being part of a group that is persistently worse off compared to others, even in the absence of personal and immediate economic hardship (Betz 1990, 1994). In addition, ideology appears to have an important bearing on welfare chauvinism, too, with those who place themselves to the far right of the political spectrum and endorse an individualistic approach to welfare being most likely to support the exclusion of immigrants from accessing government-funded assistance (Waal et al. 2010).

However, recent research suggests that objective economic hardship and subjective feelings of resentment may also work together to shape welfare chauvinistic attitudes, with resentment mediating the direct effect of objective economic conditions (Heizmann et al., 2018; Kurer, 2019; also see Raijman et al., 2003). This seems intuitive, as facing economic hardship may plausibly lead individuals to become resentful and, e.g., believe that “people like them” are generally left at a disadvantage and unable to affect their fate, which may, in turn, lead them to oppose welfare that benefits immigrants as representatives of a distinct group of “others.” We posit that the same likely holds true for the direct effect of

ideology on welfare chauvinism, though this has—to the best of our knowledge—not been empirically tested before. The paper then asks: What are the effects of material self-interest and individuals' ideological stance toward government-provided welfare if we account for feelings of resentment? To what extent are the effects of self-interest and ideology on welfare chauvinism mediated via resentment?

Our study is based on the 2014 Belgian National Election Study, a post-electoral survey carried out among a register-based probability sample of Belgians (N=1,901). We propose a new three-scale measure of resentment that conceptualizes the phenomenon in terms of a) group relative deprivation, b) perceived powerlessness, and c) perceived economic insecurity. Our hypotheses are tested by means of structural equation modeling, where we trace the mediating role of our three constituting feelings of resentment between socio-structural as well as ideological variables and welfare chauvinism. We use data from the Belgian National Election Study 2014 and all analyses are performed using Mplus.

We find that the previously observed direct, chauvinism-bolstering effect of objective economic deprivation or self-interest (e.g., having only primary education, a low income, or being a blue-collar worker) disappears once resentment is taken into account. In this regard, feelings of group relative deprivation and powerlessness appear to be very important. Interestingly, the statistically significant direct effect of ideology (self-placement on the political spectrum from left to right and embracing individual responsibility over government-provided welfare) on welfare chauvinism does not appear to be mediated by resentment. This suggests that ideology provides a distinct pathway into welfare chauvinism, while the effect of self-interest is closely intertwined with feelings of resentment.

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